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Tower of Babel, 1979

A funny thing happened to us on our way to the ethnic revolution.

If you've watched any of those late-night movies which were made during World War II, you will remember a scene which almost invariably took place, in one form or another: "The roll-call." It might be the distribution of mail at some remote military station. The names would be called out: "Cardinelli, Olshevski, Kejehowitz, Olson, Rabinowitz, Garcia, O'Shea, Jones," and so forth. The idea, of course, was to demonstrate that we were a quilt-work nation, but unified in national purpose.

Then came the so-called "ethnic revolution" of the 1960's. It was started by a group which did not get into those World-War roll-calls: the American Blacks who were heavily but separately involved in that War. They had been beaten down so long that they saw that it was necessary to build a special group pride.

For one reason or another, every group in the country took that lead. The makers of sign-buttons flourished. There was Yellow Pride, Brown Pride, Italian Pride, Polish Pride; there was even Gay Pride and Gray Pride. Everybody talked about the "ethnic renaissance," and that was fine. American democracy and European democracy have always differed radically from each other on that score. They were both, at their best, dedicated to the idea of individual liberty- from the French Revolution, and from the American Revolution. But European democracy was not dedicated to the idea of group pluralism. European

democracy was tied to the idea of nationalism, and it tended to be a mono-ethnic nationalism.

Not so the United States. In 1820, about 80 per cent of our population were immigrants. No more than a third of them came from any single country or ethnic origin. The population then became even more varied in origin. Just look at natives of foreign or mixed parentage in the country today: about 13 per cent are identified as Italian in origin; 12 per cent German; 8 per cent Polish; 6 per cent Russian (Jews are heavily involved in those Polish and Russian figures); 7 per cent British; 6 per cent Mexican; 5 per cent Irish; 4 per cent Asian; and so on.

As a result, American, "the first new nation" was the nation of the ethnic roll-call, and separate ethnic pride was always legitimate. But a lot of national energy, in the schools and elsewhere, was spent in maintaining ethnic legitimacy while building a unified national purpose.

However, we seem to be moving backwards. Ethnic pride has moved into ethnic competitiveness, and unified purpose is going down the drain. People now are elected and appointed to local legislatures and boards as "ethnic representatives," and their view of their jobs has become just that marrow. As a matter of self-defense, other ethnic groups have to organize for the same purpose. Indeed, as a group, the Jews have to watch their flanks in this kind of by-play. But we have to do more than just watch our own flanks. Somehow we have to help put a brake on that kind of every-group-for-itself balkanization. No one will

survive that way, least of all us.

The Tower of Babel, you will recall, prefaced the destruction of a society. There was an attempt to assault the heavens, to establish separate idols there. The tower reached so high, according to Jewish legend, that it took a year to mount to the top. The loss of a brick was mourned more than the loss of a life. The language of the builders was then confounded, so that each spoke a different tongue. When one would ask for the mortar, another would hand him a brick. In rage, the first would kill the second with the brick. And so the enterprise fell apart.

A part of the unfinished tower fell into the earth. Another part was destroyed by fire. A third remained standing, and had a special effect. Those who passed it forgot everything they knew. A Jewish parable for our times.

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